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SUBJECT: Belgians React to Sarkozy's Influence

#### Effect in-Country

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¶1. Overall, Belgians have welcomed the election of French President Nicolas Sarkozy. He is particularly supported by this country's northern, largely conservative Flemish majority. Liberal (Flemish VLD) Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt was quick to extend congratulations to France's new president. As he struggles to keep his position following Belgium's own elections on June 10, Verhofstadt shows interest in maintaining close bilateral ties and, like Sarkozy, advancing the European Union agenda. For their part, Francophone Belgians also recognize in him a source of energy and new ideas that could by osmosis seep across the border into fresh economic activity in Belgium's southern Wallonia.

#### Effect on the Polls

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¶2. Non-conservative Belgian politicians have maintained a studied diffidence about the victory of Sarkozy, lest he distract from their own chances at the polls. The dynamic, head-to-head nature of the French election system and its latest super-personalities inspired intense scrutiny by the Belgian public during France's long presidential race. The complex, multi-party and regional voting system at home pales in comparison to the French. Major newspapers have featured prominent before- and after-articles about France's new president. In fact, of the 14.5 million people reported to have watched the May 2 presidential debate between Sarkozy and presidential hopeful Segolene Royal, 500,000 of them were Belgian. In a debate May 26 between Francophone Elio Di Rupo (PS) and Flemish Christian Democrat (CD&V) Yves Leterme, the two leading and most colorful contenders in the Belgian election, an estimated fewer than 300,000 francophones worldwide tuned in.

¶3. Indeed, Sarkozy's election was a particular blow to the dominant Socialist Party (PS) in Belgium's Walloon region contingent with industrial northern France. Di Rupo, a vice-president of the Socialist International, attended the final campaign rally of PS candidate Royal in Lille in hopes of a little rub-off effect. It is unclear what influence Sarkozy's popular mandate may have had since encouraging francophone Liberals and Christian-Democrats to uncap fresh scandals and increase challenges that have emerged to Di Rupo's party two weeks before the vote. Belgium seems on hold until its own election results are in before fully embracing Sarkozy lest the nation's key leaders change.

¶4. In any event, Belgian political leaders are waiting to see how Sarkozy carries out his promises to renew

France's economy which, it is hoped, will in turn energize the Belgian economy, particularly in the less prosperous Walloonian south. Sarkozy and PM Verhofstadt agree that a strong Euro zone will foster job opportunities and economic growth that can benefit both countries. Belgium is a nation whose exports equal roughly three-quarters of its GDP, so its political leaders strongly favor EU policies that integrate European economies and thus benefit Belgium's highly-export-oriented industrial structure.

#### Effect on the Union

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¶5. Belgian political and opinion leaders also appear curious about the influence that Sarkozy's determination and charismatic presence will have on the European Union. Headquartered in Brussels, the EU holds key political and financial importance to Belgium. Belgians are quite proud to call Brussels "the capital of Europe" and will pay close attention to Sarkozy's relationship with the EU. According to the press, Sarkozy has won the favor of EC President Jose Manuel Barroso, in particular, for his support of economic reforms and his commitment to bring EU members to an agreement about the EU Constitution. Belgian parties are divided on this issue of renegotiating a European basic law but have kept European policy outside of the current electoral debate.

¶6. In a lightning visit to Brussels on May 23, President Sarkozy met with Barroso; Sarkozy also met with PM Verhofstadt. Both confirmed their commitment to create a separate economic body to have a firmer hand in the regulation of the Euro throughout the European Union. They also agreed that the EU must work quickly to find a solution for the Constitutional Treaty. Sarkozy reiterated his call for a quickly negotiated new EU Constitutional document. For his part, Verhofstadt said publicly that he stands behind his public which ratified the failed EU constitution. While this might appear to divide the two leaders and their nations, both expressed a willingness to find a solution soon. Barroso, in the meantime, stated that the European Commission is not in the process of negotiating an "ideal" treaty; but rather one on which all members can agree.

#### The Turkish Question

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¶7. With a large Turkish immigrant community (250,000), Belgium is sympathetic to Turkey's desire to join the European Union. Verhofstadt stated that he cannot rightfully withhold membership from a country which is in compliance with all of the membership criteria. Since the requirements are clear, it is up to Turkey to determine how it will meet the criteria for membership. In stark contrast stands Sarkozy's major campaign commitment to do everything in his power to deny Turkey EU membership.

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